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TELLS THE STORY OF THE SISAL

New Fibre Plant Is Very Old in Yucatan.

Mexicans Try to Keep Production to Themselves.

Most Interesting Report Comes From the American Consul at Progreso.

Interest in the growth of sisal fibre is not confined to Hawaii, although there is great interest being taken in it here, because there is felt here the need for the growing of by-products to sugar, as an economical measure to the development of the resources of the territory. So great is the interest in fact, that as chronicled in the Advertiser some little time ago, the Oahu Railway Company is about to devote the major portion of its lands to the production of sisal—and, more than that, stands ready to enter into an agreement to furnish plants and start small farmers on the growing of sisal on shares.

And what is sisal, about which there is at present so much talk? E. H. Thompson, American Consul at Progreso, Mexico, in a report to the State Department, says of sisal: "Sisal grass, sisal hemp, henequen, or simply sisal, are the various commercial terms applied to a fibre that is neither grass nor hemp, and that is not produced to any great extent in Sisal. The name 'sisal' was applied to it because it originally reached the outside world through the port of that name." Sisal, for many years past—or, at least, the bulk of the Yucatan product—now comes to market through the port of Progreso, where Mr. Thompson is consul. Speaking it, he says further in his report: "The agave is one of the most characteristic plants of Mexico. One of the family, the Agave americana, produces the pulque, the intoxicating drink of the country. Great fields are covered with this plant upon the Mexican table-land, and long 'pulque trains,' like the milk trains of the United States, roll

BABIES AND CHILDREN should be fairly plump. They ought to put on fat as fast as they use it up; for fat is fuel, and the burning of it makes power and force. Thin children—even along to the age of eighteen or twenty—are in danger from consumption, and from other wasting complaints. The children who starve, and the young men and women who are consumed—why, the very idea of it is frightful. For such as they there is always what the Bible calls a "mighty famine" in the land. Food, though it may be taken plentifully, does not nourish them. It makes no fat; it gives no strength. To prevent this, to cure this, to save the young ones at the mother's knees, and the bright boys and girls who are just looking at the world with ambitious eyes, is the purpose of **WAMPOL'S PREPARATION**.

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daily into Mexico City. This beverage is practically unknown to the inhabitants of Yucatan, and the agave that produces it is to be seen only as an exotic in the gardens and parks. Its place is taken by another member of the family, whose importance is more far reaching. The Agave sisalensis furnishes a fibre that not only helps to knit firmer the commerce of the whole world, but binds the sheaves of wheat so that the price of bread in every land is made cheaper for its use.

"To the casual observer a field of the pulque plant and one of the fibre plant are very similar in appearance. Both show the same peculiar green, the same many-thorned leaves; investigation, however, soon shows the difference.

"There are three known varieties of the species growing wild in the forests of Yucatan—the chelem, the cahum, and the citamci—and I think that I have found a fourth wild variety during my explorations in the interior. There are also two varieties of the cultivated plant—the yaxil, or green fibre, and the sacchi, or white fibre. The last-named plant is the most cultivated and the one producing the sisal hemp of commerce.

"The primeval inhabitants probably did not at first attempt to extract the fibre from the thick pulp, but took the leaf and wilted it in the fire, then split it, and used the splits as thongs. The leaves so treated make thongs of great strength, and as they dry they bind with wonderful force. In the primitive forms of habitation in the region, the mud and wattle 'naas' are bound together by these shreds of fibre-wilted leaves. They are shapely, water-tight, and durable, and the native builder's only tool is a heavy, sharp-edged knife. Not a spike or nail or metal of any kind enters into the building.

"Later the people found that if they cleaned off the thick pulp and the green corrosive juice they could get a firmer hold and so bind tighter. Then they learned to twist the shreds, and this idea led to the making of ropes and cords.

"The wild agave, known as the chelem, is, I believe, the progenitor of the cultivated sacchi. The fibre is of good quality, but scant in quantity. The fibre of the cahum is long and silky, but even scantier in quantity than that of the chelem, and it is said to be brittle.

"Attention was turned toward the fibre concealed in the leaf of the henequen, and in 1839 a kind of association was formed to make the experiment of producing the coarser fiber 'sacchi' on a commercial basis. It was known that the spiny-edged agave called sacchi produced a fibre coarser than that of the yaxil, but much more abundant, and consequently more profitable to cultivate, as the fibre then sold by weight and not by quality. The fibre was cleaned by native instruments, and, packed in loose bales of about 200 pounds each, was sent to New York. It found a market, but the price was such that there was but scant gain for the seller. The methods of cleaning the fibre were so slow that even with the small wages of the day, the cost per pound to the planter was discouraging. The State government, recognizing the great need of a suitable machine to clean the fibre, offered a gratuity of \$10,000 Mexican to the person inventing an apparatus capable of producing a stated output per hour. This finally resulted in the 'raspador,' the device of a Franciscan friar, which was used for many years. Today, half a dozen machines are in the market, some of them marvels of design and potency.

"A thin, rocky, limestone soil is generally supposed to be the best for the growth of the sacchi plant. Experience indicates that the fibre grown upon this class of soil has a percentage of tensile strength greater than that produced on the richer lands, though the last is more flexible and is longer. The percentage of safety allowed by the cordage makers is so high that I doubt if the diminished tensile strength of the rich-land hemp would seriously affect the quality of the output. Contrary to the general idea, a poor sandy soil is not congenial to the growth of a large, full-sized fibre plant. Few if any good-sized, well-formed plants grow very near the coast line. The best Yucatan fibre plant seems to be produced in a zone or belt following the coast, about 12 miles away from it and 70 miles wide.

"The plant can be propagated in various ways—by seeds, by cuttings, and by scions, or suckers. The first-mentioned method is now never undertaken. Very few of the abundant seeds are fertile, and the time lost in raising the seedlings is great. The second method—by cuttings—is frequently undertaken; the top of an old, nearly worn-out plant is taken just before the long pole that should bear the flowers shoots up. It is cut off and trimmed of all save the newest leaves and then planted in the ground as though it were a scion. These plants are said to produce earlier than others. The general method, however, of producing a field of the sisal plant is as follows: A field is cut and the refuse burned; then a month or so before the rainy season the 'hijos,' or scions of sisal, that have sprouted under the shelter of the parent plant are rooted out of the ground, when they get to be 18 or 20 inches high, and throw it in a heap. There they lie for

two or three months exposed to the sun and the weather. Just before the rainy season, when they seem to be dried up and decayed, they are carried to the cleared fields and planted in rows. Formerly, they so planted the young plants that they were separated by spaces of barely 2 yards, but of late years it has been found best to space them so that they will be in lines, each plant separated from the one preceding it by a space of 1 1/2 yards and the lines 4 yards apart (about 1,100 plants to the acre). Thus, long and wide lanes are formed between the rows that facilitate cutting and carriage of the leaves, and also lessen the wounding of the leaves by the spines and thorns of their neighbors.

"Previous to 1889 but little attempt was made to grade the hemp. Yaxil, sacchi, short staple, long staple—all went as 'sisal.' Now, a fine, white fibre, well cleaned and baled, can command a notably better price than mixed fibre, ill-cleaned and badly baled.

"Fire is its greatest enemy. Hot seasons do not affect it. In fact, the heat of the sun, especially when accompanied by dampness, seems to act as a tonic. It is then, if ever, that the plant recovers from its injuries. The greatest heat experienced in Yucatan for the last ten years was in July, 1900, when the thermometer reached 119 degrees F. in the half shade of a veranda; 147 degrees F. has been experienced in the sun on the principal street of Merida. Long droughts may delay its development, and by wilting the mature leaves cause them to double and injure the fibre, but it can not stop the ultimate growth of the healthy plant, once it is well rooted. Rainy seasons do not seriously affect the plants, except those in stagnant water. This weakens the plant, but this condition is not common. Cold seasons of the kind that Yucatan experiences do not seriously affect the plant. The coldest known period was in February, 1899, when the thermometer registered 47 degrees F.

"But fire conquers it. Let a spark from a locomotive, the lighted end of a cigarette, or the embers of a fire made to heat the bread of the native workers start the flames in an ill-cleaned field, and nothing but a miracle can save the crop from total loss. It is said that some planters in the past have taken advantage of the susceptibility of the plant to artificial heat; and when young plants were desired for export, they were doctored before delivery by having their roots heated over heated embers or dipped into boiling water. The effects of this treatment are not perceptible for a time, and possibly this fact may make clear to some enthusiastic foreign planter why his scions, purchased with so much care and expense, never grew and prospered. Naturally, the Mexicans do not desire to have the plant that is such a valuable product of their country made common.

"Next to fire, a large black beetle is the greatest enemy of the cultivated sisal. This large, long-nosed insect, known to the natives as the 'max,' may also attack the wild varieties, but I have not yet found evidence thereof.

The output of Yucatan sisal for the two years, 1901 and 1902, was 564,303 bales, weighing 90,005.3 tons and of the value of \$13,538,343 in American money. There will be a falling off in the supply for 1903, however, and that despite the fact that prices are good and the demand for the fibre is increasing. The cause of the shortage will be that the Mexicans are not planting new areas. There is a scarcity of labor in Yucatan, and the planters do not like to stop cleaning fibre long enough to replant old fields and plant new ones. It is the usual Mexican improvidence, which should be a part of Hawaii's opportunity.

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